

Eschew Obfuscation: Do I Need a Comma Here? by Faye Roberts

As a mark of punctuation, the comma indicates a pause in the narrative—a hesitation, like the flit of a butterfly. (The nymphalid pictured on this page is the Comma butterfly, named for the comma-shaped marks on its wings.)

A comma should signify the briefest of pauses, much like the light touch of a butterfly on a flower. It represents a lighter touch than that of its more powerful cousins. The period (full stop), the semicolon, and the em-dash are all stronger indicators, ones that highlight more pronounced breaks in a sentence.

The venerable resource *Words into Type* points out that a comma's primary function is to serve as a separator within a sentence. Its job is to prevent misreading.

For fiction writers, there's good and bad news about commas. The good news is that the stringent rules for formal and nonfiction writing are more relaxed when it comes to fiction. *Words into Type* recommends "authors should be allowed wide latitude in their preferences for comma placement (or nonplacement)." This means even the much-maligned comma splice may be permitted in fiction and especially in dialogue.

When writing, insert a comma to clarify the meaning or to help the reader understand the relationship of elements in a sentence. Too many commas can be distracting, though, so be careful. An unnecessary comma is a speed bump in the path of the story.

Comma issues are among the most common punctuation problems spotted by fiction editors. They include sins of omission (missing commas) and of commission (misplaced commas).

Here are a few examples of situations that require a comma:

Use commas in a list

The Jamaican flag is black, green, and yellow.

In the sentence above, the comma after *green* is known as the serial or Oxford comma. Some authorities say a serial comma should always be used after the next-to-last term. Others argue that comma use should be limited only to situations where this punctuation is needed to avoid confusion. The classic illustration of confusion resulting from the lack of a serial comma is "I'd like to thank my parents, God and Ayn Rand." One more comma in that sentence would add clarity and eliminate the humor, as "I'd like to thank my parents, God, and Ayn Rand."

Use commas with dialogue

"That was what I expected," David said.

When the last sentence in a passage of dialogue is a question or



Photo by Andy Seely via flickr

exclamation, other forms of punctuation may be used. With these, the comma isn't needed, as in:

"Is this what you were expecting?" David asked.

"We've got to do it now!" Mario shouted.

Use commas with nonessential appositives

My brother, Mack, is a nurse. (The speaker has only one brother.)

But

My sister Kaye is an engineer. (The speaker has more than one sister.)

An appositive is a second term in a sentence that bears the same relationship to the rest of the sentence as the first term. In the first example above, *Mack* is an appositive to *brother*. Mack is the speaker's only brother so the appositive isn't critical to understanding the meaning. In situations like these, a comma is used to set off the nonessential appositive. In the second example, the speaker has more than one sister; if the name is omitted, there could be confusion about which sister is the engineer. If there is an opportunity for confusion, no comma is needed.

Between coordinating adjectives

He tried to snatch the wet, slippery fish.

But

Here comes the yellow school bus.

He tried to snatch the slippery flying fish.

Coordinating adjectives describe the same noun and occur in a sequence. Usually, their order could be reversed and the meaning would still be the same. For instance, there's little difference in meaning between "wet, slippery fish" in the first example and "slippery, wet fish." Sequential adjectives like these should be separated by a comma.

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

In the second and third examples, though, the adjectives are not coordinate. In these cases, one adjective forms a unit with the noun it modifies: “school bus” and “flying fish.” It would sound odd to say “Here comes the school yellow bus.” Since “flying fish” is a particular kind of fish, it wouldn’t work to say “He tried to catch the flying slippery fish.” When terms like these are preceded by an additional adjective, no comma is needed.

To set off nonessential clauses or phrases

The conference, which I attended last year, will be held again in April.

Professor Martin, whose lectures are always inspiring, will be the keynote speaker.

A nonrestrictive phrase is one that provides information that’s not essential to the understanding of the sentence; if the information in the phrase were omitted, the reader would still understand the gist of the sentence. The conference will be held in April, regardless of whether the speaker shares the information that he attended last year. Professor Martin will be the keynote speaker even without the note about the quality of her lectures. The nonessential phrases are prefaced and followed by commas.

The deal with comma splices

One occasion when a comma generally should not be used is to join two independent clauses. This construction is called a comma splice—aka comma blunder, comma error, or comma fault—and is a frequent problem spotted by fiction editors. Most grammar books recommend avoiding comma splices because they can create run-on sentences that may confuse the reader.

Of all the names for this problem, “comma splice” is perhaps the easiest to remember. It effectively describes using a comma to splice together two clauses that need a stronger connection. Here’s an example of such a splice:

Abby knocked on the door, Ben crept around the house.

This example contains two independent clauses, each with its own subject and verb. In the first, *Abby* is the subject and *knocked* is the verb. In the second, *Ben* is the subject and *crept* is the verb. Independent clauses like these are actually complete sentences that could stand alone. As independent clauses, they’re entitled to their own punctuation. When they’re joined by a weaker element—the comma—the result is a comma splice.

One way to solve a comma splice problem is to let the clauses stand on their own as two separate sentences. On the other hand, if they need to be connected, use a stronger punctuation mark, such as a semicolon or an em dash. Independent clauses can also be connected by a conjunction (e.g., *and*, *but*, *as*), but a comma is needed in those cases.

Separate sentences: Abby knocked on the door. Ben crept around the house.

Semicolon: Abby knocked on the door; Ben crept around the

Resources

Browne, Renni and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*, 2nd ed., HarperCollins, 2004.

Purdue University, *Purdue Online Writing Lab*, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl>

Quick and Dirty Tips.com www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

Words into Type, 3rd ed., Prentice-Hall, 1974.

house.

Conjunction: Abby knocked on the door, as Ben crept around the house.

Of course, different punctuation choices perform a bit differently in a sentence. If you’re trying to build dramatic tension, two short, separate sentences are more effective than a longer, more academic-looking sentence with a semicolon.

Once again, the rules for fiction can be more flexible. You might deliberately toss a comma splice into a snatch of dialogue. In *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*, Browne and King suggest that dialogue including the judicious use of comma splices can sound the way people actually talk. This is especially true when a character is excited or in a hurry, as in these examples:

“I called, he didn’t answer.”

“There’s the train, grab your bag.”

“Not a problem, I’ll get it.”

Permission to use constructions such as a comma splices can certainly reduce the pressure for fiction authors, but it can also lead to the bad news: confusion. More choices bring more flexibility and variability. These plus the ever-changing nature of the English language actually add to that confusion. You *know* you’ve seen a particular usage somewhere—but you’ve seen its opposite, too. Are you recalling it from a credible source or from a more casual setting? Did you see it in a novel, a blog, an advertisement, or an article in *The New York Times*? What to do?

If you’d like to gain more confidence by strengthening your grammar muscles, become familiar with the basics. Rely on a few trusty grammar guides. Take a massive, open online course (MOOC) on the fundamentals of grammar. Bookmark helpful websites like Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL). Listen to podcasts such as “Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.” Ask your beta readers to flag questionable usage in your drafts.

Once you know the rules, you can flaunt them with more confidence.